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The Troubles Aren't History Yet: Young People's Understanding of the Past

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Introduction: history and identity amongst young people in Northern Ireland

There is little doubt that the relationship people have with history in societies that have recently experienced conflict is emotive, subjective, and publicly prominent. The use of history to support or oppose contemporary political or ideological stances is often ubiquitous, and the remembrance and commemoration of historical events are important elements in the process of creating and sustaining a collective identity.¹ In addition, the *individual* processes of creating and sustaining identity relate to these collective processes to varying degrees in ways that may either support or challenge affiliation with group identities. Whilst it would be impossible to examine the range of individual interpretations of the past, it is worth examining many of the more prominent ideas that emerge from an investigation into the relationship between history and contemporary identities in Northern Ireland, and in particular the ways in which young people relate to the past.

In October 2009 ICR was commissioned by the Community Relations Council to undertake research into the ways in which young people in Northern Ireland learn about the past and to explore what they knew of both recent and earlier historical events. The research project, entitled 'The Impact of Division and Conflict in the Past on Young People', which ran between November 2009 and April 2010, involved surveying the views of 958 young people who were accessed through a range of schools, colleges, universities and youth organisations, and focus group discussions with 238 young people in twelve locations across Northern Ireland.

The research particularly looked at the way that young people learned about the past, and where their understandings of history came from. From the outset it became clear that there was a common distinction between two

interpretations of the word ‘history’. First there was ‘history’ as an academic subject that dealt with a range of Northern Ireland’s events, people and places, and which seemed to be more abstract, detached and generally less important to contemporary lives (e.g. the Flight of the Earls, or Plantation). Secondly, there was an idea of ‘history’ that could be seen as directly relevant to contemporary individuals, this was the past as it had affected local people – perhaps family members (e.g. Bloody Sunday, or the Troubles more generally). This was the past in which the ‘other’ committed acts of violence against one’s own community. This was the past that could be seen on a direct line backwards from today – not the kind of past that existed on some abstract page, but a real and important series of events, and was not the sort of past that you could necessarily learn about in school. This is the sort of history that, at least for some young people, continues to resonate. For some, the Troubles have not finished and ongoing segregation and sectarianism were visible examples of the legacy of the past for a number of young people who lived in particular locations and in particular communities.

“The Troubles is history all right but it’s different than all the other guff. When someone says history you think you are going to be talking about something else, like Egypt or something” (Male, Protestant, 15-16, Larne).

In many focus groups and interviews with young people, any introduction to the project that was framed in terms of an investigation into history was more often than not met with disinterest and silence. But as the interviewers began to draw information from the participants, it became clear that there was certainly an interest in the past, and an active willingness to discuss it. As such, it was important for the researchers to be aware of this distinction, and to assure all participants that these interviews and focus groups were not designed to *test* the knowledge that young people had about any historical events, but to *explore* if and how the past influenced their lives, and if so, how and from where did they get their information. More often than not, the research revealed that family and community as well as school, were the key sources of information; this was an assertion that was backed up by our questionnaire data; the survey found that the three main influences on young people’s knowledge and understanding of the past were their parents (52%), school (47%) and relatives (25%). The relationship between formal and informal arenas of education about the past was further explored.

Formal education

Previous research has made the assertion that the history taught in Northern Ireland was as segregated as the school system itself, with 'Catholic' schools teaching an Irish Nationalist interpretation of historical events while 'Protestant' schools tended to teach British accounts at the expense of Irish history (Low-Beer 1999: 8; Austin nd: 2).² In 2003, the CCEA document 'Proposals for Curriculum and Assessment at Key Stage 3, Part I' suggested that pupils should be encouraged to:

{...} investigate some of the challenges of living in Northern Ireland including responding to sectarianism, ethnic division and multiculturalism (CCEA 2003: 47).

Austin (nd) notes that this 2003 document highlighted three key objectives in teaching history, one of which involves "*a willingness to challenge stereotypical, biased or distorted viewpoints with appropriately sensitive, informed and balanced responses and take responsibility for choices and actions*", with students required to have a strong sense of how history has affected their own lives and how it affected their own identity.

With respect to the teaching of history in Northern Ireland – the perception is that most primary education still relates to historical societies in Northern Ireland, such as the Vikings and the Victorians, whilst more recent political history is left until secondary school. There have therefore been disputes over what exactly pupils have been taught and how, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that the revised curriculum for secondary education tended to restrict the teaching of history to a relatively 'dry' presentation of dates and events with little real engagement amongst pupils³. Whilst the earlier practices of segregating history may be over, many young people still opt to give up the subject at the end of year 10 (at age 14) when they choose subjects to study for GCSE.⁴ Our respondents identified that this was for one of three main reasons: because history was considered 'boring', because it did not fit in with a career path, or because it clashed with another subject on the school timetable.

It would be fair to suggest that there was some initial disparity amongst participants between the idea of history as we first presented it in our focus groups, and the more connected notion of 'the past' that these participants subsequently engaged with. This was initially quite confusing. Young people definitely groaned at the thought of history, but many times this was more generally, and not just in school. Whilst more than half of the total sample of

young people (53%) found history in school ‘interesting’, fewer than one-third (31%) of respondents found history in school ‘enjoyable’ (although only 8% of respondents felt the subject in school was ‘not enjoyable’). It should also be noted that our research found that young people recognised the importance of learning about history, and many welcomed the opportunity to learn more about the recent past through formal education, and to discuss past events both among their own community and in a cross community setting. Thus, there is potential for an understanding of the past to be approached in a variety of settings. Both young people and educators referred to part of the problem being that dealing with conflict in the past had the potential to offend and ignite quite heated debate:

“When we were doing English at GCSE a lot of people got into arguments about religious stuff, really heated, people started tearing each other apart. Some people took it too far” (Female, Protestant, 17-18, Belfast).

Despite this, young people in general were of the opinion that controversial and sensitive subjects *should* be addressed within the education system. The overwhelming majority of young people (89%) also agreed with the statement ‘History helps you understand the views of others’, while similarly more than three-quarters of young people (77%) agreed with the statement ‘It is important to teach even topics that might embarrass people in order to learn the truth’. Clearly there is some desire amongst young people to tackle the prejudices of the past and move forward.

As we have stated above, history in a formal school setting can best be considered as but one context for understanding the past. Our research led us to explore other, less formal contexts for investigating history that intersected with the formal education system. The ways in which these informal elements intersect with formal education are discussed below.

Less formal education

Young people were asked to identify the most important influences on their knowledge and understanding of the past in Northern Ireland. The top three influences were parents (52%), school (47%) and relatives (25%). These findings are slightly different from those of Barton et al. (2003) who found school history classes to be the most important influence on young people’s knowledge and understanding of the past. During the course of the focus groups the role of parents and family was continually acknowledged:

"I grew up in (name of area) and that's how I knew everything through my parents and the Troubles and all. I wouldn't know anything from school like, school never taught me anything about history. All these English people and fighting that's all I knew" (Female, Catholic, 15-16, Belfast).

There were two main ways in which young people discussed the past with their parents, firstly by the young person asking a question related to a specific event, their interest in which may have been triggered by something they learnt in school or something they had seen on television. Second, parents would talk about their own experience and 'bring it up' with their children.

"But it seems to be like now, I would ask more about it, like the stuff that's been happening recently with the IRA starting up again I have asked about what happened" (Female, Protestant, 19+, Enniskillen).

With regard to parents actively 'bringing it up' with young people, these discussions were often based around family experience of particular events during the Troubles:

"Aye the UWC strike, my dad and uncle were in it, my dad told me about it" (Male, Protestant, 15-16, Belfast).

Alongside family members, young people are often able to draw upon their wider community for information about the past. Often this can come in the form of membership of youth groups, or bands, but is most publicly prominent in the form of murals depicting various historical events and characters. Whilst it is certainly the case that for some young people Northern Ireland's murals has become so common that many simply do not take much notice of them, it is also true that these murals are prominent reminders of the past. In this sense the murals provided a source of information linked to territory and locality:

"I find them interesting but because you see the past and what way it was back then. It has mostly changed now but I like to see how it was back then and how it has changed now" (Male, Catholic, 15-16, Belfast).

For example, in Derry Londonderry murals depicting the events of Bloody Sunday were believed to convey information about that event which had an impact on the city itself, in other areas murals were painted in dedication to 'fallen volunteers' from the local area:

“Up here the murals tell you what happened on Bloody Sunday, it lets you know the history and all. There’s one for Marty McCann I think too. They are good like, the one there of a coffin shape with all the names on it, class” (Male Catholic, 15-16, Derry Londonderry).

One of the more common discussions in our focus groups was the way historic events had become dramatised in films and television. This source of information about the past was listed as important by just under a quarter of all respondents (24%), which places it as only just below relatives (at 25%), and as more important than friends (18%), newspapers (13%), the Internet (10%), books (8%), museums (8%), clubs/associations (7%), and youth workers (2%). A significant number of young people discussed the impact that films about the Troubles had on their knowledge of events, and some of the most referenced films included *‘Mickybo and Me’* (2004), *‘Hunger’* (2008), *‘The Wind that Shakes the Barley’* (2006), *‘Fifty Dead Men Walking’* (2008), *‘Michael Collins’* (1996), *‘In the Name of the Father’* (1993) and *‘Five Minutes of Heaven’* (2009). Films were often a way for young people to initiate interest about a historical event or individuals involved in the Troubles, after which they would subsequently go through other channels to ‘find out more’ about them:

“And the one about the IRA informer who went to Canada, the recent one (Fifty Dead Men Walking). I watched that and then went on the Internet to find out about the guy” (Male, Protestant, 19+, Enniskillen).

In a number of cases young people asserted that their *only* source of knowledge about particular events came from television and film. Discussing the impact of the Daniel Day Lewis film *‘In the Name of the Father’* one young person commented:

“That was about the Catholics who were wrongly convicted of blowing up, was it in Birmingham or London, the Guildford Six? I only know that ‘cos I watched the film!” (Male, Catholic, 15-16, Ballycastle).

There were a number of differing views as to the impact watching a film could have on a young person, and at times community background appeared to impact upon the attitudes towards a film. For example a number of young Protestants felt that at times films could ‘not be believed’ due to their ‘propaganda value’:

“‘Hunger’ is a load of propaganda for them ones, ‘Fifty Dead Men’ is about battalions in the IRA and ‘The Boxer’ is about an ex-IRA member” (Male, Protestant, 12-14, Belfast).

It is perhaps no surprise that these films stir an emotional response, and it is fair to see why they have been included in some elements of formal education in order to prompt these responses in the classroom.⁵ To what extent young people considered these dramatisations to be authentic accounts of historical events and figures was difficult to ascertain, but they were certainly having an impact. And this led us to consider the depth and breadth of knowledge about the past that many young people have, or do not have.

One of the recurring elements of our qualitative research was the sketchy nature about past events that young people held – even those events that one would assume to hold great importance to contemporary communities. As such, it was no great surprise to the research team when young people claimed little understanding of less common events, such as the Flights of the Earls, or Cromwell's invasion; but it was often revealing how little some participants claimed to know about more symbolically significant events such as the Battle of the Boyne, or Internment.⁶ The community background of the participants is certainly worth noting here, with many responses for clarification of the reasons behind certain activities or commemorations, such as bonfires in August and July often being framed in terms of an excuse to go drinking, or to antagonise the 'other side'. However, while community background at times influenced which events were selected, the overall numbers of young people selecting events such as the Twelfth or the Easter Rising based on their community background were perhaps not as high as might be expected. For example, only 21% of young Catholics selected the Easter Rising as one of the three most important events while just 26% of young Protestants chose the Battle of the Boyne/Twelfth of July.

A group of young Catholic males debated the reasoning behind holding a bonfire in August every year as follows:

Young Person One *It's an excuse to get monkied!* (Male, Catholic, 12-14, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person Two *I don't know like. Do you?* (Male, Catholic, 12-14, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person Three *I haven't a clue* (Male, Catholic, 15-16, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person Two *To get drunk and have fun?* (Male, Catholic, 12-14, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person Three *No, I know it's for someone, to celebrate something, but I don't know what it is* (Male, Catholic, 15-16, Derry Londonderry).

Similarly, although the Easter Rising was the fifth most selected event young people felt they had the most knowledge about, in-depth discussions about the extent of this knowledge revealed that specific knowledge of the event was patchy at best:

Young Person Two *The Easter Rising was years ago, they don't really celebrate that here?* (Male, Catholic 12-14, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person One *What's the Easter Rising?* (Male, Catholic 12-14, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person Four *Jesus?* (Male, Catholic 12-14, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person One *What?* (Male, Catholic 12-14, Derry Londonderry).

Young Person Two *No, there is a difference between the Easter Rising and Jesus Rising* (Male, Catholic 15-16, Derry Londonderry).

In other focus groups of young Catholics the conversation followed similar lines with some interviewees believing that the main reason behind the August bonfires was the chance to 'stick two fingers up to the Prods':

Young Person One *Because know the way Protestants have the Twelfth of July - right they only do it to wind the Protestants up* (Male, Catholic, 15-16, Lurgan).

Young Person Two *Aye, they put a Union Jack and all on it. Yeah, there's a lot of Union Jacks on it, it gets a big cheer. They put an effigy or a mannequin on it and that got a huge cheer when it went up (in flames). It had like a Rangers top on and a Union Jack round it, I don't know who it was* (Female, Catholic, 15-16, Lurgan).

Young Protestants displayed similarly fluctuating levels of knowledge in relation to historical events. In relation to the Easter Rising, one young Protestant commented:

Aye during the world war and the taigs thought they would be funny and try and attack us cos we were distracted, but we still sorted them out (Male, Protestant, 15-16, Belfast).

A number of young Protestants also suggested they knew nothing about the Battle of the Boyne, despite often selecting it as their most important historical event, the response usually being that the event was part of 'our culture' without any further explanation of what exactly was meant by this:

I know nothing about the Boyne (Male, Protestant, 15-16, Belfast).

I haven't a clue why we have the Twelfth (Female, Protestant, 17-18, Belfast).

At times a number of young people appeared somewhat confused as to what exactly they had learnt in relation to Irish and Northern Irish history. One such case occurred amongst one group of young people in Belfast when there was some debate between the young people themselves over whether they had learnt about Wolfe Tone or The Wolfe Tones, and, whether or not the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland was James Craig or Daniel Craig.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, young people who studied history for longer in school, i.e. respondents who had GCSE, A-Level and a University setting believed they knew 'a lot' compared to participants with only year 8, 9 and 10 level history. This was particularly the case in relation to events dating since the Easter Rising, but this is perhaps not surprising given that the longer one studies history in school the more likely one is to study events associated with the Troubles. Young people's 'educational' knowledge of events acquired in school thus tended to be different from their 'social' knowledge of events which were more firmly rooted within their community background and other sources of information beyond school.⁷ This point was reinforced by the fact that there were no major differences in levels of knowledge about different events among pupils in different types of school. For example, while knowledge about the Flight of the Earls was limited among all young people, approximately 50% of young people attending each of the three main types of school felt they knew 'a lot' about the Famine. Overall young people attending grammar schools were more likely to indicate that they knew 'a lot' about the events than pupils at other schools, with the largest differences being in relation to the Easter Rising, Partition and Internment.⁸

Analysis of the questionnaires suggests that a number of young tended to select the most important historical event to them on the basis of their community background; young people were more likely to rate their knowledge of historical events more associated with 'their' community as higher than other events, and participation in historical commemorations and particular events were influenced by community background. It is certainly

the case that ‘stories, murals and commemorations’ are important sources of knowledge about the past as Barton and McCully (2006) suggest, however there was also evidence within this study of some young people moving beyond this to select events which were important based on what they had learnt in school.

It is worth noting that although there were a number of events which young Protestants were more likely to select than young Catholics and vice versa, the overall numbers within each community are not as large as we may initially assume. The majority of those young people who selected the Twelfth were young Protestants, but only one in four (26%) young Protestants selected the Twelfth as one of their *most* important events in Irish history. Similarly, while 75% of young people who selected the Easter Rising were Catholics, only one in five (21%) young Catholics selected this event as most important. It is important not to overestimate the levels of conformity with decisions made regarding historical events and their potential relation to community background. Despite recognising this complexity however, whenever a group of predominantly young Protestants or young Catholics were asked to identify the most important event to them, the responses followed a familiar pattern.

Similarly, when faced with a large number of responses from young people that indicated they would appreciate the opportunity to learn more about history from a different perspective, are we to assume that these participants will *actually* investigate ways of doing this, or are they merely accepting that this is an ideal and positive attitude to have? There may be an appreciation that we are now in an era of mutual respect and understanding, but that does not necessarily mean that every individual has the time and energy to explore the perspectives of history from the ‘other side’. For now, it may be enough to appreciate that the *potential* for mutual understanding is apparent in Northern Ireland, even if it hasn’t quite reached full speed yet.

Conclusion

In summary, our research supports the idea that history is still a contributing symbolic factor in the lives of young people in Northern Ireland today. Young people do incorporate ideas about historical events into their social and cultural construction of identity, but these ideas come from a variety of sources and some are more influential than others, with the most influence sources being parents, school and family. Despite the common immediate reaction that all history is ‘guff’, and the implication that this reflects a disparity between academic history as learned in school, and ‘the past’ as a

series of important events that contribute to community identity, there is evidence to suggest that young people's interpretations of history are perhaps more subtle. Yes, there is a massive variation as to the levels of knowledge that young people have about the past, and perhaps we have focussed on the sketchy nature of some young people's understandings of history in order to illustrate this, but the reality is that young people are exposed to interpretations of history from a variety of both formal and informal sources, and are thus only in a position to make decisions based on the information they get. If the only information some young people get is based on biased and sketchy interpretations of the past, then this is the understanding of the past that will be perpetuated. But despite a continuing trend to frame the past in terms of one's community background or location of residence, there does seem to be evidence of a genuine willingness to appreciate alternative perspectives of the past. History as an academic subject is being developed to connect students in a more emotive manner. This is being done not only in history lessons, but also in other subject areas, reflecting the importance of the past to contemporary social and cultural identity. The role of family, community and media should not be underestimated as complementary, and sometimes competing, sources of information, but educators and community workers are increasingly looking to present history to young people in a way that challenges one-sided interpretations of the past.

Notes

- 1 See Andrews et al, 2009; Jarman, 1997; NicCraith, 2002.
- 2 Low-Beer, 1999:8; Austin nd:2.
- 3 Barton and McCully, 2006.
- 4 See for example *The Observer* 'History is being forgotten from GCSE curriculum, fear school teachers. Secondary schools study warns the subject could disappear from the syllabus as pupils drop it at 13.' Sunday 13 September 2009, downloaded 1 September 2010. The article referred to pupils in the UK dropping history at the age of 13.
- 5 For example extracts from the film '*Mickybo and me*' have been used in an education programme at the Ulster Museum.
- 6 The respondents had on their questionnaire a list of events starting with Oliver Cromwell and ending with the Assembly 2007.
- 7 There were some interesting findings in this context, for example, in relation to events like Cromwell invading Ireland, the Battle of the Boyne, the Siege of Derry, the 1798 rebellion and the Famine, the differences were small, whereas in relation to the Easter Rising and more recent events the 'gap' increased significantly with those young people who studied to a higher level believing themselves to know more about them. This perhaps reflects the range of earlier historical events, which are more likely to be covered in the first three years of secondary and grammar school when history is compulsory.
- 8 More grammar school pupils felt they knew 'A lot' about the Easter Rising (47%), compared to 37% of secondary pupils and 29.6% of pupils at integrated schools. The figures for Partition were 42%, 24% and 26% respectively, and similarly for Internment the figures were 29%, 9% and 8%.

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